

Program Prioritization
Final Report from Chancellor David Belcher
July 2013

Introduction

Background

The very first initiative articulated in Western Carolina University's strategic plan, *2020 Vision: Focusing our Future*, states that the university will "Undertake a rigorous and inclusive process to prioritize all undergraduate and graduate programs based on universally applied criteria, including quality, regional need, demand, enrollment trends, retention and graduation rates, and alignment with the University mission and the following integrated curricular focus areas: creative arts, education, environment, health, innovation and technology, and recreation and tourism." Two issues motivated this initiative:

- **Funding.** Western Carolina University cannot be all things to all people. It never could, but the economic climate of the last five years and the resulting budget reductions have made this fact, too often ignored, a blatant reality. Western Carolina University has lost \$32 million in state funding since 2008, and, based on budget proposals currently under discussion in Raleigh, we anticipate further reductions in state support in both 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.
- **Focus.** Western Carolina University must focus, ensuring that it does not diffuse its efforts and resources, both fiscal and human, in so many directions that the institution jeopardizes the quality of all of its programs.

Our university has undertaken a program prioritization process this year to fulfill the commitment of Initiative 1.1.1. This endeavor has been led by a superb group of faculty, staff, and students which itself benefitted from the excellent leadership of Dr. Vicki Szabo, our late Provost Dr. Angi Brenton, and, in the latter part of the last academic year, Dr. Mark Lord who served in Provost Brenton's stead. The task force has kept the campus community informed throughout the year-long process. Program prioritization reports and information regarding the process can be found at: <http://www.wcu.edu/about-wcu/leadership/office-of-the-provost/program-prioritization/index.asp>.

Higher Education Funding Model Context

Western Carolina's program prioritization process has taken place against the backdrop of a North Carolina higher education funding model which is in transition. In recent years, enrollment growth has been the primary source of increased state funding through a biennial process of enrollment forecasting. Until recently, institutions which failed to achieve their enrollment targets were held harmless; that is, they kept the funding based on enrollment targets they did not achieve. The hold harmless approach, however, is no longer used. Institutions which do not achieve their enrollment targets will have to give up enrollment growth funding. As one can see, enrollment and achieving enrollment growth targets, while always important in the past, will be even more important for state funding purposes moving forward.

However, North Carolina, like many states around the country, is moving to embrace an outcomes-based funding model, one in which institutions will be funded in part based on their achievement of specific metrics. This funding model evolution is no surprise inasmuch as it has been prominently featured in national and state discussions of higher education funding in recent years. While UNC General Administration and the universities are still in dialogue regarding specific performance metrics and related goals, we know that Western Carolina's list of metrics will include ambitious goals for the fall-to-fall retention rate of first-time, full-time freshmen; the four-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time freshmen; the six-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time freshmen; and the four-year graduation rate of transfer students who come to Western Carolina with an associate's degree. Achievement of targets in each of these categories will influence state funding once the performance-based funding model is fully implemented.

I anticipate that the eventual overarching state funding model for UNC System institutions will include both enrollment growth and performance-based funding. Thus, enrollment numbers, retention rates, and graduation rates, key metrics of program viability in WCU's program prioritization process this year, will be fundamentally important to future state funding for Western Carolina University. That is, state funding for all of our institutional priorities will be tied to enrollment, retention rates, and graduation rates. It is therefore imperative that each program at Western Carolina University own the responsibility for its own achievement of enrollment, retention rate, and graduation rate goals. The program prioritization process has revealed weaknesses in these areas.

My Review

In my review of the recommendations from the Program Prioritization Task Force, I have studied the following performance indicators:

- Enrollments and enrollment trends by program;
- Program cohort sizes;
- Individual course section sizes for the last four semesters, comparing, by individual section, census date enrollment to end-of-term enrollment and comparing both of those to established section caps;
- Average class sizes of course sections in specific semesters; and
- Program retention and graduation rates and trends.

These numbers clearly indicate the degree to which we efficiently and wisely invest our fiscal resources. The funding we receive through state allocation, tuition, and fees is precious, and it is imperative that we utilize those resources efficiently with an eye toward maximum return on investment and with total commitment to the sound investment of taxpayers' support.

I have explored quality indicators. I have considered the degree to which programs and their owners (faculty, coordinators, heads) have been thoughtfully pro-active, *before* the advent of program prioritization, in recruitment and retention efforts and, where such efforts exist, the degree to which they have been successful. I have explored the differences between need in the

region and actual demand for Western Carolina's programs. And I have wrestled with potential impact of program loss.

A few miscellaneous thoughts:

- A decision to discontinue a program does not imply a lack of value for the discipline. It is, rather, a statement about current program reality.
- We do not have the luxury of offering quality programs which do not enjoy student demand.
- The leaders of several of the programs under review made the case for continuing their programs because of need in our region and state. As I reflected, however, I had to ask myself why WCU should continue programs which attract very few students even if there might be a need in the region or state. If Western Carolina is clearly not playing much of a role in meeting the need, why then should WCU continue to support those programs with scarce resources?
- The leaders of several of the graduate programs under review made the case for continuing their programs because of the instructional contributions of their graduate assistants. While this issue is certainly of practical concern, I simply cannot accept that inexpensive instruction is a legitimate rationale for keeping a program.
- Several of the programs under review align with the six integrated curricular focus areas or other *2020 Vision* priorities. While discontinuing such programs may appear to be at odds with our strategic plan, I am not inclined to support low-demand programs.

Going Forward

In Part 2 of its Final Report, the Program Prioritization Task Force made a number of excellent recommendations which I, in turn, recommend to the Office of the Provost for consideration and implementation as appropriate.

Finally, let me be clear that Western Carolina University will integrate ongoing program prioritization into its regular cycle of program review, and I ask the Office of the Provost to assume the lead in orchestrating its systematic incorporation. I certainly applaud and support the Task Force's recommendation that the institution work to consolidate its various program review processes for efficiency's sake, and I trust that we will make quick progress on that front. But program prioritization will be an integral part of our work going forward in order to ensure that we are a focused institution, to ensure that we demonstrate our professed commitment to student success as manifested in excellent retention and graduation rates, to ensure that we offer academic programs of ever increasing quality, and to ensure that we invest our precious public resources wisely for maximum benefit.

Decisions

Category 1 Programs: Recommended for Potential Investment

The Program Prioritization Task Force recommended eight programs for Category 1 and potential investment. I accept the Category 1 recommendations as presented. Assuming that they continue to boast exceptional profiles, these programs will receive particular consideration for future investment as funding becomes available. Category 1 programs are listed on P. 21 of the Task Force's Final Report:

<http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/ProgramPrioritizationReportPart1.pdf>

Category 2 Programs: No Action Recommended

The Program Prioritization Task Force recommended 96 programs for Category 2 and no additional action. I accept the Category 2 recommendations as presented. I strongly encourage leaders of programs in this category to review feedback from the Program Prioritization Task Force and address any issues or opportunities noted in order to ensure program strength and the achievement of maximum potential. Category 2 programs are listed on P. 21 of the Task Force's Final Report: <http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/ProgramPrioritizationReportPart1.pdf>

Category 3 Programs: Recommended for Action Plans

The Program Prioritization Task Force recommended five programs for Category 3 and action plan development. I accept the recommendations of the Program Prioritization Task Force and ask the Office of the Provost to work with the affected programs in articulating action plans, the fulfillment of which will determine the long-range viability of the programs in question. The five programs recommended for action plans are as follows:

- Residential Environments Minor.
- Bachelor of Arts in Stage and Screen.
- Bachelor of Science in Education/Middle Grades Education.
- Master of Arts in Education/Elementary and Middle Grades Education.
- Master of Science in Chemistry.

Voluntary Discontinuation

The following programs have been voluntarily discontinued, and I ask the Office of the Provost to proceed with discontinuation plans as guided by the policies of the University of North Carolina and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges:

- Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (just one route to this degree will be discontinued; others will continue).
- Master of Arts in Education and Master of Arts in Teaching/Chemistry.
- Master of Arts in Teaching/Music.
- American Studies Minor.
- Multimedia Minor.
- Earth Sciences Minor.
- Appalachian Studies Minor.

- Broadcast Telecommunications Engineering Technology Minor.
- Digital Communications Engineering Technology Minor.
- Broadcast Sales Minor.

Category 3 Programs: Recommended for Phased Discontinuation

I accept the recommendations of the Program Prioritization Task Force to discontinue the following programs and ask the Office of the Provost to proceed with phased discontinuation plans as guided by the policies of the University of North Carolina and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

- Women's Studies Minor.
- Bachelor of Arts in German.
- Master of Arts in Education and Master of Arts in Teaching/Health and Physical Education.
- Master of Arts in Education and Master of Arts in Teaching/Mathematics.
- Master of Science in Applied Mathematics.
- Master of Arts in Education/Music.
- Master of Music.
- Master of Arts in TESOL.
- Master of Arts in Education and Master of Arts in Teaching/TESOL.

I have not accepted the recommendations of the Program Prioritization Task Force to discontinue programs in two disciplines for reasons detailed below. I ask the Office of the Provost to work with the affected programs in articulating action plans, the fulfillment of which will determine the long-range viability of the programs.

BFA in Motion Picture and Television Production

The BFA in Motion Picture and Television Production is a unique program in which many of the performance metrics are on an upward trajectory: retention rates are good, the number of majors is healthy, the number of graduates is increasing, and the average class section size has increased significantly in the last five years. In addition to the numbers analysis, the BFA in MPTP is a program with impressive quality indicators. Graduates are accepted into top graduate programs and gainfully employed in degree-related fields. And, in late spring and thus outside the decision-making process of the Program Prioritization Task Force, the program received an external validation of quality from the Sony Corporation which chose Western Carolina University's MPTP program as the recipient of a gift of its most advanced professional video production camera. Sony made such gifts to less than a dozen film programs in the United States.

To be sure, the BFA in MPTP is an expensive program, but if program cost formed the primary criterion, many more programs would be in question.

I encourage the Provost and MPTP program leaders to review concerns expressed by the Program Prioritization Task Force in the development of an action plan to enhance the program's profile.

BA in Spanish/BSED in Spanish

The profiles of these two programs are weak at best. Performance metrics across the board are passable but unimpressive. Nonetheless, I strongly believe these programs have enormous potential, particularly in light of the burgeoning Latino population in our region and state. The long-term viability of programs in Spanish rests in the capacity of leadership at the program, department, and college levels to achieve two goals: 1) to re-envision these programs as dynamic degrees which are responsive to the applied needs of the Western North Carolina region and 2) to generate robust enrollment, retention, and graduation profiles. The action plan should reflect these goals.